WEB OF STEEL

By CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY
Father and Son

Here Is a Powerful Story of Failure and Sacrifice and Love and Courage and Success

CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.
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Colonel Illingworth had dismissed Meade from his mind because he hated him. Helen Illingworth refrained from talking about him to her father because she loved him. So they were never in each other's presence without thinking of the man. This was a source of great irritation to the father. On occasion he almost found himself at the point of shouting at his daughter to talk about him. And that she so carefully avoided the subject and as the avoidance was so obviously in accordance with his own wish, the restraint irritated him the more. The fact that they both sought so carefully to maintain the old relationship made it more impossible. For relationships which are primarily founded on love cannot be maintained by constraint without the weakening of the great force upon which their tenure had previously depended. There is nothing like concealment to impair and weaken a tie unless it be a ban! Prohibitions rarely prohibit.

Still there remained a deep and abiding affection between father and daughter and they managed somehow to get along outwardly much as before. Indeed Colonel Illingworth was more kind and considerate than ever to his daughter, and she repaid him with more than usual care and devotion. The very fact that she seemed to have accepted the situation and obeyed the law he had laid down gave him some compunctions of conscience. On that account, perhaps, he had been the more willing to accede to her request to take Shurtliff into his employ. In no way was Shurtliff responsible for the failure of the bridge or for any mistake in the calculations of the Meades, and Shurtliff was an invaluable man, not only for an engineer but for the president of the Martlet Bridge company.

He was familiar with the subjects that Colonel Illingworth discussed and wrote about. He was intelligent and reliable to the last degree, his reputation for steadiness and discretion unquestioned, and he was marvelously efficient in his subordinate position. The colonel, having first tried him out, had advanced him rapidly after learning his worth. He was now his private secretary. Shurtliff being an old bachelor without kith or kin, and not originally fond of women, found himself suddenly in touch with one of the sweetest and kindest, as well as the youngest and most beautiful of a sex about which he knew nothing.

His new position naturally brought him into close touch with the colonel. The old man transacted a good deal of his business in his own house. Shurtliff was frequently there. Under other circumstances Helen Illingworth would have treated him with that fine and gracious courtesy which she extended to everyone with whom she came in contact, but she would not have especially interested herself in him. She would not have made him the object of the delicate attention and given him the careful consideration which would have completely turned the head of a younger and more susceptible man.

There had been a prejudice in Shurtliff's mind against women in general, and Helen Illingworth in particular. He had quickly realized that she above all persons had the greatest interest in disproving Meade's statement and his own and in laying the blame for the failure of the bridge where it belonged, on the shoulders of the patron to love whom had been the habit of his life. Therefore the old secretary was constantly on his guard lest he be trapped into admissions or actions which might be used to discredit the elder Meade and convict the two conspirators.

But Helen Illingworth was far too clever to allow any inkling of such a design to appear. Not the remotest hint of such a purpose did she betray. She deliberately set about to win the old man's regard and respect and perhaps eventually his affection. She had the ordering of her father's household, of course. That was a matter in which the colonel concerned himself not at all so long as things went smoothly, as they always did. He was a little astonished at her treatment of Shurtliff, but the old secretary was at heart a gentleman, and there was no reason why, if Helen chose to include him among her friends and invite him to dinner and otherwise make him welcome in the house, she should not do so. And in his dry, precise way Shurtliff was rather likable. He was touched and flattered by her kindness, and in spite of his suspicions, which gradually grew less, by the way, he exerted himself to show his appreciation and to bear himself seemingly in his new life.

Colonel Illingworth had no suspicions whatsoever that there had been any conspiracy to suppress the truth and shift the blame. True, his daughter had protested on that fatal day that she did not believe Meade and Shurtliff, but that was in the excitement of the moment and understandable in view of her plighted troth. Helen had never discussed that with him; even the very name of the engineer being banned, she was silent. She was wise enough not to try to worry or bother her father with arguments on that point, to which, of course, he would not have listened in any event.

Accordingly the conferences with Rodney had never been brought to his notice. There was no use stirring up trouble and strife. There was no necessity even to discuss it with her father until she had found more proof. So he at least had no suspicions as to her treatment of Shurtliff. He could not see any end to be gained and therefore he jumped to the conclusion that there was none.

In course of time, as Miss Illingworth never referred to Meade in the secretary's presence, all his mistrust disappeared. Finally he even brought

The Old Man Got to Thinking of Her as a Daughter.

up the subject of Meade's whereabouts of his own motion. Although the girl was fairly wild to talk and ask questions she had wit and resolution enough to change the subject when it had been first broached and for many times thereafter.

Helen Illingworth was fighting for the reputation of the man she loved and for her own happiness, and she was resolved to neglect no point in the game. She partook in a large measure of her father's capacity, but she added to his somewhat blunt and military way of doing things the infinite tact of woman, stimulated by a growing, overwhelming devotion to her absent lover. She cherished that feeling for him in any event and would have done so but the whole situation was so charged with mystery and surcharged with romance that it made the most powerful and stimulating appeal to her.

She lived to vindicate Meade and she bent every effort toward that end. She did not overdo it, either. Finally, as he himself continued to press the subject upon her, she made no secret to Shurtliff of her devotion to the younger Meade, her sorrow that he had made such a declaration, and her determination to wait for him. She was always careful to end every conversation by saying that she knew her outlook was perfectly hopeless and that she could expect nothing except sorrow until the younger Meade was rehabilitated. She so contrived matters, while constantly affirming her feeling for Meade, as to let Shurtliff infer that she was convinced that he had been telling the truth in what he had said.

After a time she deftly appealed to him to know if he could not help her discover the truth she tactfully maintained even in face of the evidence that Shurtliff had given. And she did this in such an adroit way that Shurtliff became convinced that she did not connect him with any willful deception, and that she believed that he was deluded himself and occupied the position of an innocent abettor. And Shurtliff, in his strange, old, self-contained way, finally grew to like Helen Illingworth exceedingly. Indeed he started in his work with natural antagonism to Colonel Illingworth, and when he sensed, as he very soon did, the difference that had arisen between father and daughter, he espoused the cause of the latter. He was the kind of a man who had to devote himself to somebody. He began to wonder if there was any way to secure the girl's happiness without betraying the elder Meade.

She compassed the secretary, who was, of course, old enough to be her father, with sweet observances and he found it increasingly hard to keep true to his falsehood. Now she was capable of fascinating bigger personalities than Shurtliff, although she cared little for that power and rarely exercised it. The old man actually got to thinking of her as a daughter. Sometimes when they had an hour together he found himself seconding her arguments for the innocence of the younger Meade, for she had progressed that far by now, with little details which his knowledge and experience of the two men could supply. Trifling in themselves as were these contributions, as Rodney pointed out when she repeated them to him, they nevertheless added something to the cumulative force of the argument so laboriously built up by the friend and woman. And they were decidedly indicative of a growing mental condition on the part of Shurtliff from which much might be hoped and expected.

But Shurtliff could not bring himself to come out boldly and confess, and his failure to do that made him more and more miserable. At first his conscience had been entirely clear. He had viewed his conduct in the light of a noble sacrifice for the great man. Now he began to question: Was it right to blast the future of the living for the sake of the fame of the dead? Probably he would have questioned that eventually without regard to Helen Illingworth, but when he began to grow fond of the woman and when he realized, as she unmistakably disclosed it to him, that her own happiness was engaged and that he was not only ruining the career of a man but wrecking the life and crushing the heart of an entirely innocent woman, he had a constant battle royal with himself to pursue his course and to keep silent.

Yet such is the character of a temperament like that of Shurtliff, narrowed and contracted by a single passion of life and lacking the breadth which comes from intercourse with men and women, that his compunctions of conscience only made him the more resolved. The lonely, heart-broken old man swore that he would never tell. The young man could go his own gait and work out his own salvation, or be damned, if he must. The woman's heart might break, pitiful as that would be, but he would never tell. He was as unhappy in that determination as any other man fighting against his conscience must inevitably be.

Sometimes looking at the misery in the old man's face (for on his countenance his heart wrote his secret), Helen Illingworth experienced compunctions of conscience of her own, which she told to Rodney in default of other confessor. That fine young man appreciated fully the woman's feelings and understood her keen sensibilities, and his comprehension was a great comfort to her. He encouraged her to persevere. Since it was only through Shurtliff that the truth could be established, she must not falter nor reject any fair and reasonable means to gain his whole confidence and make him speak. It was, after all, simply a question of whether the game was worth the candle. How best could they expose or fight a deceit? And that the deception was for a noble purpose and to serve a laudable end in the minds of the deceivers did not alter that fact.

"You are doing nothing in the least degree dishonorable, Miss Illingworth," said Rodney, reassuringly. "Woman's wiles have been her weapons since the Stone Age."

"But I do feel compunctions of conscience occasionally."

"Personally I think you are abuntantly justified," urged Rodney.

"Yes, to establish the truth, to give the man I love his good name would justify more than this," she replied, "and yet"—she smiled faintly—"my conscience does hurt me a little. The old man is beginning to love me."

"That's the reason it hurts you," said Rodney. "When he loves you enough he will do anything you want, as I would—"

The young man stopped, looked long at her, and then turned away with a little gesture of—was it appeal or renunciation? He was too loyal to his friend to speak, but he could not control everything. The tone of his voice, the look in his eyes, his quick avoidance of her, told the woman a little story. They had been very closely associated, these two. Rodney also had not had much advantage of woman's society, certainly not of a woman like Helen Illingworth. She had given him her full confidence in the intimacy. He was a man. He loved like others. She was too fond of him, too great, too true a woman to pretend.

"Mr. Rodney," said the girl, laying her hand on his arm as though to restrain him, "that way madness lies."

"Miss Illingworth," said Rodney, turning and facing her, his lips firmly compressed, his eyes shining. "I'm devoted to Bert Meade and to you"—he lifted her hand from his arm and kissed it—"and I'm going to do everything for your happiness."

Brave words and he said them more bravely.

"I understand," said the woman, "and I honor you for your loyalty to your friend and your devotion to me. Loyalty is not always the easiest thing on earth, I know."

"You make it easy for me because you understand."

So the fall and winter were filled with interest to Helen Illingworth and there was in her days no lack of hope. Every Saturday the flowers that Meade had arranged for spoke words of love to her and bade her not forget, although that was admonition she did not need.

That was the only message that she received from her lover. He had dropped out of sight completely. They caused search to be made for him, sought tidings of him in every possible way, but in vain. Her heart almost broke sometimes at the separation. She had confidence enough in her power over him, and in her woman's wit, to feel that if she had only another opportunity she might learn the truth, force it from him, constrain him to tell it, because she loved him!

CHAPTER XVII.

Once More Unto the Work.

The Martlet Bridge company had finally weathered the storm, although it was, of course, not intrusted with the new International bridge which was about to be commenced. When Bertram Meade read of the new undertaking, it cut him to the heart. This time there would be no mistake. In the necessity of recouping its fortunes, the Martlet Bridge company entered upon an even wider career. The directors took contracts which they had hitherto disdained because they were comparatively unimportant, and they bid on operations which they had hitherto left to competitors. They were building the great steel viaduct by the town of Coronado below the dam, and they had already built the splendid steel arch that spanned the ravine, here almost a gorge, in the valley of the Kicking Horse to the eastward of the big mesa.

After Christmas, Colonel Illingworth decided to make another of his tours of inspection, and as Helen was not looking particularly well from the strain under which she was laboring, he offered to take her with him, especially as he was going to the far Southwest, where the weather would be mild and pleasant, to inspect the growing viaduct and the completed arch. She gladly availed herself of the permission. There was always a possibility, albeit a most remote one, that she might hear of Meade. That it might be well to invite a representative of The Engineering News, to wit, Rodney, to accompany them, so that the really splendid work the Martlet company was doing might be made widely known. The party consisted of the father and daughter, Curtiss, the chief engineer, Doctor Severence, the vice president and financial man, and Rodney.

Now Helen Illingworth had not the least reason in the world to suspect that Bertram Meade was in any way connected with this engineering project, but Rodney had pointed out and had imbued her with his own belief that sooner or later, when Meade was found, he would be found engaged in engineering in some capacity.

"It's in his blood," said Rodney. "He can no more keep away from it than he can stop breathing. He can't do anything else. Somewhere he's at the

Helen Illingworth Stood on the Steps of the Private Car.

old job. It might be in America, and it might be out there at Coronado, or it might be in South America, Europe, Asia, or—"

"I wonder if we can't find out all the engineering work that is being done in the world and send representatives to seek him," said Helen Illingworth.

Rodney laughed.

"To hunt that way would be like hunting a needle in a haystack. I cannot bid you hope that he is there; in fact, I think it is most unlikely that he would be any place near where the Martlet people are operating, but there's a chance, even if only the faintest one."

Well, women's hearts can build a great deal on a faint chance. They are calculated for the forlorn hope. And so Helen Illingworth stood on the steps of the private car as it rolled across the mile-long temporary bridge at Coronado, and scanned the workmen grouped on one side of the track, their work suspended for a moment that the train might pass on the wooden trestling, in hope that she could see in one of them the man she loved and sought. And Rodney stood by her side, equally interested, searching the crowd with his glance, also.

There was nothing in the town to attract Helen out of the car. She had visited West and Southwest many times. Colonel Illingworth, with Rodney and Severence, there left the train. Miss Illingworth decided to go into the hills and get away from the arid and heated plains. A siding had been built near the steel arch under the slope of the hill from which the huge mesa arose, within two miles of the dam, and the car was to be placed there. The men left behind would use the private car of the division superintendent of the railroad when they had ended their several tasks.

It had been raining dismally during the afternoon, and when the car was detached and switched to the siding and left up in the hills some twenty miles from the town, it was too wet and uncomfortable to leave it. Disregarding the downpour, however, Curtiss, who had come up with it, made a very careful investigation of the completed bridge, which more than surpassed his expectations in its appearance of sturdy grace, as well as in the evidences of careful workmanship in its erection.

That evening the special engine pushed the other private car up from the valley, bringing the people who had inspected the bridge. A few more weeks would complete the great viaduct. Everything was proceeding in the most satisfactory way and Colonel Illingworth was very much elated over the situation.

"Who would have thought," he said as they sat down to dinner in the brightly lighted observation room, "that it would rain in this country at this season of the year?"

"It will probably be over by tomorrow morning," observed Rodney.

"If it continued long enough and rained hard enough, that dam would have to be looked after. We'll go over and see it tomorrow," said the colonel cheerfully.

"What would happen if it gave way?" asked his daughter.

"It would flood the valley, sweep away the town, and—" he paused.

"Well, father?"

"Ruin the bridge."

"We can't afford to have another failure after the International," said Severence.

Now there was a newcomer at the table, a big rancher named Winters, whom Rodney had met in the town and had introduced to Colonel Illingworth. The latter had invited him to dinner and to stay the night in the extra sleeper, and Winters, who had particular reasons for wanting to talk with Rodney and to meet Miss Illingworth, had accepted.

"You can count on its stopping," he said at last. "My ranch is a hundred miles to the north of here. I heard Rodney was with your party, and as he was an old classmate of mine—in fact, my best friend at Harvard along with Bert Meade"—and the mention of the forbidden name caused quick glances to be passed around the table, but raised no comment—"the chance of seeing him brought me down here. I know the weather along this whole section of the country; it's the dryest place on earth, and I would almost offer to swallow all the rain that will fall after this storm spends itself."

"Well, that's good," said Curtiss, "because I've heard that the dam lacks very little of completion, but that the spillway has been delayed."

"You'll find that the storm has broken in the morning," said Winters confidently.

After dinner Colonel Illingworth, desirous of talking business, called the men of the party, except Rodney and Winters, back into the observation room of the other car, leaving the two men with Helen.

"Mr. Shurtliff," said Helen, as the men stepped out on the platform, the secretary following, since his employer had intimated his services might be needed, "if you can, I wish you would come back here as soon as possible."

"Certainly, Miss Illingworth," said the secretary, "immediately, if your father finds that he does not need me."

"Rod," said Winters when they were alone, "I'd go a long way to see you, but I might as well be frank. I did not come down these hundred miles, leaving my ranch in the dead of winter with all its possibilities of mishap to the cattle, simply to see you, or even Miss Illingworth here, although she is worth it," he went on with the frank bluntness of a western man.

"Of course you didn't," said Rodney, smiling. "I know I'm not a sufficient attraction."

"I came to talk about Meade."

"Mr. Winters," said Helen, clasping her hands over her knees and leaning forward, "if you know anything about him, where he is, what he is doing, how he fares, is he well, does he think of—I beg you to tell me."

"Miss Illingworth, there is nothing I would refuse to tell you if it rested with me."

"I don't mind confessing to you, you are such old friends, you and Mr. Rodney, and so devoted to Bert, that I am worrying—"

"You need say nothing more, Miss Illingworth. I know all about the situation. Rodney wrote me and—"

"Well, then, you understand my anxiety, my reason for asking?"

"I do."

"And you will tell us?"

"I wish to heaven I could."

"Can't you tell us anything?"

"Well, yes, I can."

"What?"

"It may be a breach of confidence."

"I'd take the risk," said the girl, her bosom heaving. Was she at last about to hear from her lover?

"Know where he is, old man?" asked Rodney.

"I think so—not sure, but—"

"Where?"—from the woman, breathlessly.

"I didn't agree to tell you that."

"What then?"

"All I can say is that after the death of his father he turned up at my ranch one day some five months ago and told me his story."

"What!" exclaimed Rodney. "Did he tell you he was innocent?"

"Not at first. He told me he was guilty."

"But you didn't believe him, did you?" asked the woman impulsively.

"I certainly did not."

"Why not?"

"Well, I don't know why. I just didn't, that's all. I know Meade. I know him well. I know his make-up. We get accustomed to sizing up a man's actions out West here, and it didn't take me longer than it took him to tell the story to know that it wasn't true."

"Oh, thank you for that," said the woman.

"But our beliefs are not evidence, Dick," interposed Rodney.

"We can't prove it and that's the point. I told him," continued Winters, "that it was a da—darned lie—I beg your pardon, Miss Illingworth. I mean I told him that it was not true and that he was a fool for sticking to it, and—er—he—admitted—I—er," floundered Winters, suddenly realizing that he was on the eve of a breach of confidence and checking himself just in time. "In fact, the subject was painful to him, and I let him alone, which is what we generally do to a man who doesn't want his affairs inquired into too closely," Winters ended lamely, realizing how near he had come to betraying his friend's confidence and telling of Meade's own admission that he had said what he had to save the fame and honor of the father.

"Well, what next?" asked Rodney, understanding as did Helen Illingworth herself the ranchman's hesitation, and respecting it, although the unavoidable inference gave her great joy.

"He hung around the ranch for a month or six weeks to get his balance. He was pretty badly broken up. I'm a bachelor myself and don't know much about those things, but I can say that he loved you, Miss Illingworth, more than life itself."

"But not more than the reputation of his father," she said with a little tinge of bitterness.

"Well, I take it he looked at that as a matter of honor. You know a man's got to keep his ideals of honor."

"Even at the expense of a woman's heart?" said the girl.

"It sounds hard, but I guess we've got to admit that. But that's neither here nor there," he continued, gliding over the subject, "the point is I found that he had to fight it out himself, and I mainly let him alone. I gave him a horse and gun and turned him loose in the wilds. Best place on earth for a man in his condition, Miss Illingworth. You can go out into the wilderness and get nearer to God there than any place I know of. He came back finally, turned in his gun, borrowed the horse, bade me good-by, and said he was going out to make a new start."

"Where did he go? Which way?"

"He was headed south when I saw him last, and all this lay in his way."

"You mean—?" cried the woman.

"He may be here?" said Rodney.

Winters nodded.

"I have thought so. It's only a guess, of course, and probably a poor one. But when I read in the papers that Colonel Illingworth was coming here, and that you were along, and Miss Illingworth, I thought I'd just take a run down here and see what could be done."

"Oh, I'm so glad you have come."

"He's not working on the bridge," said Rodney.

"How do you know, Rod?"

"I examined all the pay rolls, and none of them bears his name."

"He wouldn't work under his own name in the Martlet Bridge company," said the woman.

"Certainly not. That was only my first step. I went around among the workmen, too, and I got a look at every one of them. I'm sure he's not there."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Clock Struck One.

Horrid Bore—"I rise by an alarm clock." Pretty Girl—"I retire by one. There it goes now!"—Judge.